

## 4 What Does it Mean to Be Human?<sup>1</sup>

Christian theology emerges from our interacting with the gospel, with scripture, with the church's doctrinal tradition, with the thinking of our age, and with our own experience. That is not so much a statement of what ought to be the case, but of what is inevitably the case, whether we like it or not and whether we acknowledge it or not. Sometimes Christian theologians may wish to interact only with the gospel and scripture and to avoid the influence of tradition, contemporary thinking, and personal experience, but whether they like and are aware of it or not, they will actually also reflect those other influences, as is apparent when one considers examples of the attempt to avoid it. On the other flank, theologians can avoid interaction with the gospel or scripture, but by definition their work will not then be Christian theology; and arguably that would also be the case with theology that avoided interaction with the church's doctrinal tradition.

It is as well, then, to try to be reflective about the way this inevitable process will take place. I myself write as someone involved professionally and existentially with the First Testament scriptures. I write in the context of some interesting developments in doctrinal thinking over recent decades concerning what it means to be human, and that not least in the context of developments in thinking over what it means to be God. I write in the context of more secular thinking about the person and of feminism. And I write in the context of being married to someone who has become physically disabled, who in her own being is a different person from the woman I married, and who as I write has just asked me what day it is.

When people meet the disabled, the way they sometimes instinctively treat them suggests that they subconsciously regard them as not quite the same sort of beings as the rest of us. This applies to the physically disabled, but especially to those who are in some way disabled in spirit or mind. As an alternative starting point, I presuppose the conviction and the experience that when as an "ordinary" person I meet someone who is disabled, I meet a person who is different from me in an important way, but who is a genuinely human being. There are analogies with what can happen when I meet someone of a different race. I meet someone else made in God's image. Their different-ness contributes to my understanding of what it means to be human, and what it means to be God.

It is an aspect of the glory and the challenge of humanity that we are different from each other. If the diversity within humanity reflects our being made in God's image, it reflects the diversity within God, epitomized in God's being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Disabled people contribute to that diversity of humanity, modeling other ways of being human than the way of the abled. It is thus when abled and disabled live, work, and worship together that humanity is represented in its fullness and God imaged.

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<sup>1</sup> First published as "Being Human" in *Encounter with Mystery: Reflections on l'Arche and Living with Disability* (ed. Frances Young; London: DLT, 1997), pp. 133-51, 183-84.

The statement that human beings were created in God's image has had a prominent place in discussion of what it means to be human,<sup>2</sup> but it has functioned more as a vehicle upon which to project convictions or as a stimulus to reflection than as a concrete indicator of what it means to be human. Over the centuries the statement has thus rung a series of different bells. In ages that wanted to stress rationality or morality or humanity's spiritual nature, reason or morality or humanity's spiritual nature became that in which the image of God lay. Our age is inclined to stress creativity as well as control, relationship as well as inner being, body as well as spirit. Theological attention has thus been attracted to the fact that the image in which humanity was created is the image of a creator, that the beings created in God's image are physical beings, and that Genesis goes on to tell us that "God created humanity in his image, created it in the image of God, created it male and female" (Gen 1:27), though the observation that God created humanity male and female is more likely a separate statement than a spelling out of the implications of being in God's image.

Like much of Gen 1 - 3 the notion of being in God's image has been able to stimulate or reflect so much theological thinking because it is a symbolic statement. As such it constitutes not a proposition with fixed content but a stimulus to thought, an invitation to reflection whose content is not predetermined by the person who presents us with the symbol. In this it resembles the cross or the breaking of bread. And it is a "tensive symbol" rather than a "steno-symbol."<sup>3</sup> A red traffic light is a steno-symbol; it needs to denote something explicit and straightforward, in the U.S.A. as much as in Britain; we can cope with driving on a different side of the road but we would have more difficulty with green meaning "Stop." The fact that the expression "image of God" is a tensive symbol is in keeping with its lack of explicitness in its context. By its nature it opens up fields for thought rather than circumscribing thought. In principle it thus legitimates the insights regarding what it means to be human that have been expressed when people have stressed the importance of rationality or morality or spirituality or control or creativity or bodiliness or relationship, though it will be important to see the dangers in using texts as mirrors that confirm what we think rather than windows that enable us to see something new. Describing us as made in God's image invites us to keep chewing over the question "What does it mean that we are like God?" My concern here is to consider the implications of counting disabled people are among the "we."

It would actually be a suspicious situation if we thought we knew what it meant to be like God; it would seem to imply we knew what God was like. This leads into a second sense in which we should not necessarily resist "thick" understandings of the divine image, understandings that go beyond what may be justified by a historical exegesis of Gen 1:26-27. What that statement means is spelled out over many pages that follow in the Bible. When we meet with God at the beginning of the Bible story we meet with all of God, as we meet with all of a human being when we first meet them. Yet

<sup>2</sup> On its meaning, see now J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> So also G. McFarlane, "Strange News from Another Star," in Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991), pp. 98-119.

the more we hear a person's story the more we understand them, as the story fills out the initial impression. No doubt occasionally that process means the impression gets corrected, but more predominantly it gets deepened. So it is with the story of God. In considering the way the scriptural story has this effect, I group my thoughts around the notions of task, of journey, of relationship, and of body.

## 1 Task

If the idea of being in God's image is spelled out in Gen 1 itself, this most likely comes in the declaration of God's intent in so creating us: "Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion...." Being like God means being commissioned to control the world on God's behalf; this is the task for which God created humanity.<sup>4</sup>

As the First Testament story unfolds, this insight has little overt prominence, despite its being a key point in Gen 1. On the usual view Gen 1 was composed among people transported from Israel to Babylon, within a refugee community whose world had collapsed and who had no control of their lives or their destinies. This creation story is told in such a way as to proclaim a gospel to them. One aspect of that preaching is the declaration that against all appearances God intends them to share in the control of the world and of life that God intended for all humanity. The fact that they are deprived of control of their lives and are controlled by others is not the last word, because it belies the creator's vision for humanity, in which an integral place is taken by the exercise of responsibility and stewardship, and thus of authority and power.

Now presumably all that is true of disabled people, with at least two implications. First, it implies that the abled accept an obligation to seek to share with the disabled the task of making the world and the responsibility to exercise control and authority in the world. One aspect of this is that it is our vocation to seek to free the disabled to be in control of their own lives as we are, to be free, rather than to run their lives for them. In the context of modernity, the notion of sovereignty or control recalls that of self-transcendence, the idea that humanity makes the world and even makes itself. The idea that humanity makes the world resonates naturally enough with Gen 1, for if there is one evident characteristic of the God in whose image we are created, it is that this God is creator, so it is natural for us to see creativity, world-making, as a characteristic of humanity, and a characteristic in which disabled people thus share.

Second, the presence of the disabled among those who are in God's image implies that the abled learn from the disabled how to go about creativity, world-making, control, exercising authority, as well as vice versa. It has become a commonplace to blame Gen 1:26 for the spoiling of the world by a humanity that believed it had the right to do what it liked with it. The text itself has implications that work in another direction. If humanity is commissioned to rule the world on God's behalf and as God-like, its ruling will reflect God's activity and nature. The story has already shown this

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hans Walter Wolff. *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 159-65, 226-27; Ian Hart, "Genesis 1:1 - 2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis," *TynB* 46 (1995): 315-36.

activity and nature to be of a generous and liberating rather than a grasping and oppressive character.

Beyond that, the disabled have the capacity to reveal to humanity a facet of being human from which the abled can often hide, our weakness, vulnerability, and dependence. It is only modernity that has exploited the earth on the gargantuan scale that threatens the earth's survival, which implies that the key factor was something other than the text of Genesis written 2500 years ago. This key factor is more likely modernity's re-visioning man as omnipotent, in the image of God who had already been re-visioned as having omnipotence as his key attribute (the gender-specific "man" and "his" are appropriate).<sup>5</sup> If the disabled are characterized by vulnerability and the capacity to call forth love, they embody aspects of humanity that reflect aspects of the being of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, aspects of the nature of God that humanity is called to image in its controlling of the earth. They embody the fact that there is sometimes a mysterious power in poverty, vulnerability, and weakness, a power to move and transform.

The people who are called to rule, as people who are God-like, are people who are insufficient for the demands that life places upon us and who need to own this if we are to rule in a way that is not ruined by it. We need to prove that it is not only being Christian that depends upon trust (that is, we are justified by faith). Being human itself depends upon trust. We live by faith, by depending on something outside ourselves, on God or an idol.<sup>6</sup> The disabled embody that fact about being human. We cannot be self-sufficient in relation to other human beings, or in relation to God.

The disabled also draw our attention to the fact that the attempt to exercise control, the activity of creation, occupies six days but not seven. Further, it does not constitute the ultimate climax of creation's story. That climax lies in a rest from activity, such as the disabled may be constrained to accept. But then they give us the opportunity to prove that "only those who live slowly get more out life."<sup>7</sup> They invite us to a patient, listening attentiveness that replaces decisiveness and competitiveness and offers us transformation.<sup>8</sup> They invite us to the play, spontaneity, and impulse that are part of being human.

On the sixth day, then, humanity is created in the image of God the worker, the creator. On the seventh day God stops, and suggests another aspect of deity that this image will reflect. If disabled people need to be freed to take a share in the stewardship of the world that is involved in creativity in the image of God the worker, the converse is that they can already model for us the possibility of being human and God-like by inactivity and not only by activity. Many disabled people are people seeking to live ordinary lives in unconventional bodies.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps they refuse to

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<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "Destruction and Liberation of Nature," a lecture at St John's Theological College, Nottingham, UK, October 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "On Grief and Consolation in Modern Society," a lecture at St John's Theological College, Nottingham, UK, October 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Vanier, untitled talk at Cliff College, Calver, UK, June 1995

<sup>9</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p. 23.

accept the fact that they are different. But others are people who live non-standard lives in their non-standard bodies, lives that are less active and more like a sabbath without a week's work.

## 2 Journey

In the filling out of the identity of the God is in whose image we are made, a key point is God's appearing to Moses, when Moses asks who God is, and is told "I am who I am" and that God's actual name is "Yahweh" (Exod 3:14-15). When we call someone by name, we indicate that we recognize them as a person; the name encapsulates the mysterious treasured individuality of the person.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the statement "I am who I am" is as disputed and as enigmatic as the phrase "in God's image." One insight to which it points is the fact that God is who God is as I am who I am, a unique individual who cannot be summed up by a list of characteristics. God is prepared to provide such a list (classically, that God is merciful, gracious, patient, committed, faithful, forgiving, though prepared to be tough: for instance, Exod 34:6-7).<sup>10</sup> But the list does not capture the person.

As a human being I can be described by means of a list of characteristics such as enthusiastic, imaginative, colorful, physical, and unassuming (to repeat some of the more repeatable ones that my friends have suggested). Yet such lists do not satisfactorily sum up the person. In a strange sense the fact that I am "John Goldingay" says more about me than an inventory of adjectives does. While in Western cultures names do not usually have the significance they commonly have in some traditional cultures (they do not express someone's destiny or God's promise to them), they have just as much reference. My name refers distinctively to that unique configuration of characteristics (both attractive and quirky) that comprises me. When someone who knows me addresses me as "John" it can be a reminder of all that, and thus, it is a precious experience when someone who loves me addresses me by name. I am acknowledged as who I am, even if neither speaker nor addressee knows all of what that is. As a human being I am a person called by name, by God, and by another human being.

In addressing disabled people by name, we affirm to them *that* they are and *who* they are. We affirm our love for them, which operates despite or because neither we nor they may yet know much of who they are. Naming reflects knowing and loving, but at least as much it expresses loving and thus facilitates knowing. This has implications for people such as those with Alzheimer's Disease who may be so profoundly mentally disabled that we may wonder what their "knowing" of themselves can mean. "They may no longer 'know' who they are, but the church knows who they are."<sup>11</sup> Oftentimes it may be apparent that addressing them by name is received as an affirmation of love that meets with a response of love and trust. The one who names thus receives in return the gift of being loved and trusted, and is built up.

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<sup>10</sup> See chapters 1 and 2 above.

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, "What Could it Mean for the Church to be Christ's Body?" *SJT* 48 (1995): 1-21 (see 10).

So in Exod 3:15 it is suggestive that as well as saying "I am who I am," God offers Moses the name "Yahweh." There is a hint that this name recalls the "I am who I am," but it is at least as significant that Yahweh simply has a name and shares it. God's having a name at all draws attention to a unique individuality, an aspect of the one whom humanity images. And if there is a mystery about the unique individuality of each human person, how much more is there a mystery about the unique individuality of God.

God's "I am who I am" points to the freedom of God that makes it possible for God to be whatever God wishes or needs to be. It makes God also the origin of and the model for the freedom of humanity made in that image. Freedom, "creative freedom," is the "conscious, rational, discriminating, unifying, purposeful element in the human being that leads us in one direction rather than another."<sup>12</sup>

In that context it also hints at a key feature of the way in which this freedom is exercised. God's being "I am..." is a promise to Moses, a promise about God's being one who will always be always there, there when needed, there when a crisis comes. It is not a statement about abstract being, as the Greek equivalent *ego eimi* probably is, but a statement about a consistent yet changing presence. Who God is emerges in contexts where God is needed, contexts where other persons are in need and God becomes something new, or gives expression to something new from the depths of that inexhaustibly-resourced mystery and freedom, in a way called forth by the context and by the other person. For God and for human beings the realm of freedom consists of possibilities not yet realized, so that our humanity is actualized only contextually.

Freedom and the reality of possibilities not yet actualized is thus another aspect of being in God's image that the disabled may have spectacular opportunity to enter into. The point may emerge in its own way from the story of Adam and Eve in Gen 2. They are surely created with maturity as their destiny rather than as being already perfect. Further, as human beings we are strangely capable of reflecting on who we are and thus of changing who we are and how we act.<sup>13</sup>

Yet one fact that the subsequent Bible story certainly reflects is that God-like is one thing humanity is not, however we understand the term. God-likeness is humanity's destiny, the goal of its journey; indeed becoming human is the goal of our journey. Paradoxically, one of the things that is then constitutive of being human now is our being on the way to this goal that is at the moment unreachd.<sup>14</sup>

When I was twenty or twenty-five I subconsciously assumed, I think, that now I was grown up, nothing else much would happen to me; I was shaped, and the rest of my life would be more of the same. One of my slightly astonished reflections when I passed fifty was that nothing could have been further from the truth; and one of my excitements was to realize

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<sup>12</sup> John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity* (London: SCM, 1982/New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 15, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Macquarrie, "A Theology of Personal Being," in *Persons and Personality* (ed. Arthur Peacocke and Grant Gillett; Oxford/New York: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 172-79 (see pp. 172-75).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, pp. 50, 60, with his references to Johann Gottfried Herder.

that there was no reason why a process of change and growth should not continue for another twenty-five years (unless death intervened, but then that is but a paradigm shift of change and growth). I was sad to read recently a novelist observing that he has to do more research for his novels now he is sixty because he does not have so much new experience to treat as a resource. I was then encouraged to hear a theologian incidentally reveal that in his sixties he has carried on having all manner of new experiences that become a resource for his theological reflection. The disabled both point to this in themselves and enable it in others.

Our lives are journeys. This may not mean they are progressing towards some definable goal, as if ideally we could reach that goal and then be ready to die. They may be more like individual equivalents to history itself: history manifests no progress (except in the trivial technological sense) but it constitutes humanity's journey, in which achievements and insights come and go, sometimes becoming platforms for new insights and achievements, sometimes giving way to failures and blindnesses.

The story of Israel's ancestors on their journey is a parable of the fact that all humanity is on a journey. The journey motif does not reappear in stories such as those of Saul and David but they continue to embody (or to stimulate) reflection on the mystery of what it means to be human. Both these two kings are of chief interest not because they were kings but because this leads to the telling of their human lives, both of which (ironically) were characterized as much by constraint as by freedom, constraints from outside in the case of Saul (pulled this way and that by the Yahweh who cannot be understood) and constraints from inside in the case of David (pulled this way and that by the inner personality that cannot be understood).

If our lives are journeys, our reflection on them will naturally take such narrative form. That is true for disabled people. The difficulty is that they may have difficulty telling their story. Jean Vanier describes one of the first disabled people he lived with, a man who had not been told that his mother had died. Jean Vanier in due course took him to her grave, upon which the man cast himself in sobbing anguish. No doubt that reflected the pain of losing his mother such as anyone might feel, and the pain of not being told.<sup>15</sup> I wonder whether another significance of the sobbing anguish is the fact that his mother represented his story, his past, his journey. He was now cut off from it and unable to articulate it. He had lost his history, his story, his "memory." He became in this respect a non-person. There is no doubt that disabled people live narrative lives, that their lives are journeys, but these lives' narrative significance may not become a reality for people themselves until they have the opportunity to articulate their story.

The lives of disabled people are manifestly journeys. They illustrate how part of the mystery of human individuality is that it is not static and unchanging. When a disabled person who has been neglected or institutionalized comes to be befriended and known, that person can change and grow. When a person becomes disabled, that takes them onto another journey that can look (and probably is) more painful but can also involve breathtaking transformation. The former may be led from bondage to freedom. The latter may look as if they are on the way from freedom to

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<sup>15</sup> So Jean Vanier, untitled talk at Cliff College, Calver, UK, June 1995.

bondage, but they may be able to take control of or own their changing humanity in such a way as to make it a new form of freedom.

Because the abled are the statistical norm, we may think we define real normality and we may thus assume that we represent full humanity and creativity. Disabled people minister to us by making more obvious a truth that applies to us all: we have not arrived. Full humanity lies ahead of us, in the resurrection of the body which transforms the whole person so as to make us fully human, and in the little experiences we have now, the little steps that we take, towards full humanity, as the Holy Spirit has God's way with us and brings about some anticipation of resurrection fullness. The disabled draw our attention to the fact that all of us are on the way to full humanity.

Insofar as the journey is a corporate one, the disabled are simply part of humanity's journey, the church's journey, their family's journey, my journey. They not only take part in that journey but form a resource for others on it; for the question whether we are becoming human, growing towards imaging God, is in part a question about whether disabled and abled are journeying more and more closely together.

### 3 Relationship

Disabled people thus draw our attention to the fact that human beings are designed to live in relationship. They may sometimes draw attention to this negatively, by their unhappiness and frustration at not being in relationship. They certainly do it positively, by their uninhibited joy in relationships, by their lack of self-sufficiency, which makes them more evidently need to be in relationship in order to live at all, and by their capacity to draw others into relationship.

Genesis draws attention to the fact that human beings are created male and female. At least three possible implications of this fact are worth noting.

First, in the context God goes on to commission them to procreate, to fill the world, and this has been reckoned to be the point of their being male and female. Yet on the previous day other creatures were commissioned to procreate and fill the world without such reference to their sexual differentiation (v. 22), and this makes it unlikely that procreation is the main or only point of the reference to human sexual differentiation. In many cultures, having children is felt to be a mark of being fully human, both for men and women. For many disabled people, having children may be an impossibility. They help us handle the question whether full humanness depends on that experience. Humanity as a whole has, in any case, well kept the commission to fill the world and may have to resist the temptation any more to overfill it. Disabled people may be compelled to discover and to evidence for the rest of humanity that there are other forms of fecundity, of "capacity to touch hearts and to give life."<sup>16</sup>

Second, sexual differentiation epitomizes the differentiation and diversity among human beings. It is the glory and the challenge of humanity that we are different from each other, and the sexual difference is the most elemental difference. When men and women live, work, and worship

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (London: DLT, 1985), p. 141.



together, humanity is represented in its essential diversity, and God is imaged. When abled and disabled live, work, and worship together, humanity is represented in another form of its essential diversity, and God is imaged.

Third, in the context of that differentiation we are indeed made to be in relationship. That is so for human beings made in God's image because it is true for God in the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. "It is communion which makes things 'be.'"<sup>17</sup> God is love in the sense that the Father is love, and reveals the fact by realizing the threefold divine being. God thus issues in Son and Spirit, each of the three unique but realizing their uniqueness in relationship rather than in egocentrism. Our divinization (our realizing the goal of becoming like God and thus being human) thus consists in our participating in God's existence, having the same kind of personal life as God does. Our salvation consists in the survival of that personal life of love in relationship despite all the pressures that assail it, including death itself. "A particular being is 'itself' – and not another one – because of its *uniqueness* which is established in *communion* and which renders a particular being unrepeatable as it forms part of a relational existence in which it is indispensable and irreplaceable," so that we come into being in communion and love.<sup>18</sup> While will, reason, self-understanding, and moral instinct are important aspects of what it means to be human, it is now a commonplace to note that these emphases of the Western tradition overemphasize the inner working of the individual. I know I exist not because I think but because I am loved and I love. Conversely, fear threatens existence; indeed, if my reaching out to someone else meets rebuff, my existence is threatened in an absolute fashion.<sup>19</sup>

A further implication of God's having a name that symbolizes God's unique individuality is that we should not try to identify the uniqueness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit any more than that of the individual human being, because that can only tell us *what* the person is, not *who* that person is; it is to destroy the person's uniqueness and make him or her a classifiable entity. The person's real identity is recognized only in relationship.<sup>20</sup> As Yahweh's exchange with Moses suggests, this being is intrinsically a "being with." It is of the essence of the triune God that it is metaphysically impossible to "be" without being in relationship, and the same is true of human beings in God's image. It is not that we first exist and then relate.<sup>21</sup> Our humanity and our freedom is actualized contextually not merely by means of individualistic acts of choice but only in encounter with other people in acts of love and trust set in the context of relationships of understanding and shared life.<sup>22</sup> Who God is emerges in relationships.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary/London: DLT, 1985), p.

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<sup>18</sup> J. Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity," *SJT* 28 (1975): 401-48 (see p. 410).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. John Aves, "Persons in Relation," in Schwöbel and Gunton (ed.), *Persons, Divine and Human*, pp. 120-37 (see p. 125).

<sup>20</sup> So J. Zizioulas, "On Being a Person," in Schwöbel and Gunton (ed.), *Persons, Divine and Human*, pp. 33-46 (see pp. 45-46).

<sup>21</sup> Zizioulas, "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity," p. 415.

This is hinted in God's "I will be with you"; it is nearer to being explicit in God's chosen repeated self-description according to which, as well as being "I am" and "Yahweh," God is "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod 3:15). They are words Jesus later cast at some smart-aleck theologians who produced rationalist arguments for questioning the possibility of resurrection (Mark 12:26-27). He added the gloss "God is not God of the dead but of the living," with the implication that when God enters into relationship with someone, that infuses them with a life that cannot simply expire. The relationship cannot have died if it was real. Jesus' gloss is in keeping with Exodus. God's being is identified by relationships, involvements, and commitments to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The being of those made in God's image is identified in relationships, involvements, and commitments.

Disabled people and our relationships with them draw our attention to this fact. They themselves enter into a fuller humanity in relationships, and they call us to the same destiny in our relationships with them.

The reality to which we are here referring needs to be expressed in terms of living in community as well as in terms of living in relationship, for the two are not the same. I live in relationship as an individual; being-in-community takes the matter further. Living in community with disabled people gives both the abled and the disabled the possibility of realizing their humanity by being drawn out of their closed individual worlds (which the abled, at least, may see as the means of safeguarding their humanity) into a shared life in a network of relationships. This network transcends exclusiveness and both embraces and is embraced by other people who are different from us. That makes us alive, personal, human. Disabled people have a strange power to call forth love and thus both to call forth humanity and to reveal the nature of divine love. When a culture like that of the West is characterized by interrelated individualism, isolation, alienation, and homelessness, alternative communities such as those of the abled and the disabled offer an alternative culture to the collapsing one, an alternative culture that can establish an alternative order.

It has naturally been customary to find differentiation in relationship expressed in marriage, but disabled people are less likely to marry and are among the groups of human beings who draw our attention to the fact that marriage is but one illustration of humanity's destiny to live in relationship. If the assumption that people will have children is one tyranny that hangs over humanity, another is the assumption that people will marry, and even more that the relationship between husband and wife will fulfill virtually all a couple's need of or capacity for relationship. A couple have the capacity and the need for other forms of love and friendship, and the disabled remind us and illustrate for us the capacity and the need for such relationships of love and friendship. More specifically, if they are not involved in full sexual relationships, they help to relativize the importance of sexual relationships for us. There are other forms of loving friendship.

On a gloomy day I am inclined to reflect that in some Western cultures, at least, it seems that men do not want to be in relationship and

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Speaking about God in the Face of Atheist Criticism," in *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 3 (London: SCM, 1973) = *The Idea of God and Human Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), pp. 99-115 (see pp. 111, 113).

women want to be in relationship only with other women. There are reasons for both phenomena. The disabled remind us of the point that Gen 1 hints at, that some of the most fruitful relationships involve differentiation. It can seem easier for men to relate to other men, or at least for women to relate to other women, for like to relate to like, for abled to relate to abled and avoid disabled, and in some ways perhaps for disabled to relate to disabled; when Ann went for a while to a disabled day center, I was struck by the sense of community and relationship there based in part on what people have in common. The “differently abled” political correctness at least invites us to see that abled and disabled are human beings who need to be in relationship with each other in order to realize more of their full humanity in differentiation.

## 4 Body

Being human is an intrinsically bodily matter. Disabled people draw attention to this, paradoxically, because they have to battle with being bodily in ways that others do not, and this continually reminds them and us of their bodiliness.<sup>23</sup>

We have noted that discussion of the image of God has often focused on human characteristics such as rationality or morality or spirituality. If this discussion referred to bodiliness, it did so to affirm that of course likeness to God did not lie here, because God is spirit. Yet an image is usually a physical thing, and a natural way to understand humanity’s being in God’s image is to see it as signifying that we are the appropriate physical beings to represent God in the physical world. The commission to rule the world draws our attention to an ongoing feature of the story of humanity and of the people of God, that it is lived in the world, in the way bodiliness makes possible.

The statement that human beings are made in God’s image stands at the beginning of the story told through Old and New Testaments, and it both interprets this story and is interpreted by it. It is as if during the Bible story we are invited to keep reflecting “Now you need to remember that this is so because they are made in God’s image.” The incarnation is a key point at which this invitation is issued. God had no logical difficulty about becoming a human being because human beings were created in the beginning as just the kind of physical beings that God would be if God *were* a physical being. Indeed, God’s becoming a human being makes more plausible the idea that God’s image lies precisely in humanity’s embodiedness and not in a spiritual nature divorced from the body.

As well as providing something of the explanation of what happens as the story unfolds, the fact that humanity is made in God’s image is itself explained and given content by that story. At the end of the Bible story we are thus invited to conclude “So *that* is what it means to be made in God’s image,” and the incarnation will again illumine what that signifies.

Human freedom has been described as not the ability to make a decision but the capacity to embrace incapacity, the capacity to turn weakness into strength by realizing power in weakness.<sup>24</sup> Disabled people

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<sup>23</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Zizioulas, “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity,” p. 428.

have forced upon them the opportunity to find the freedom that comes from embracing incapacity, and insofar as they do so, they embody for the rest of humanity that aspect of being human which we may not have forced upon us and may avoid. In denying capacity we too may find freedom and capacity. We may again consider an insight from the moment when God appears to Moses and asserts a commitment to Israel. The Israelites are a weak people, bound and frustrated, groaning and crying in bondage. Initially God does nothing to alleviate their weakness, except tell them to go and confront Pharaoh. Perhaps that is the way they are to find freedom and thus realize the image of God before they actually leave Egypt, embracing their weakness and thus turning it into strength. In turn the incarnation leads to the cross and the disabling of God, which shows the way to a distinctive kind of perfection or maturity that is more explicitly related to vulnerability and weakness.

At the beginning of the scriptural story, once humanity is outside the garden in Eden there is more reference to sex, parenthood, and work (Gen 4:1-2); then one of the first things Adam and Eve's children do is pray (Gen 4:3-4). The understanding of the divine image that sees it as lying in our spiritual nature, our capacity to relate to God, has not misconceived the Bible's assumptions about what it means to be human. Prayer is an intrinsic part of that, even when people have transgressed God's limits and found themselves cast out of God's garden. Disabled people may remind us that worship and prayer are not spiritual in such a way as not to be physical, bodily. Worship and prayer are not (necessarily or solely) refined matters of brain and rationality.

Within the Bible's own book of prayers, the first actual prayer is a wail (Ps 3), and as such it reflects the character of human speech in its elemental nature, before it becomes a cooler matter of brain and reason (as we fantasize, at least). But "all our early speech is an inarticulate eloquence that gets us what we need to survive: food, warmth, comfort, love. We need help. We need another. We are not furnished, as the lower animals are, with instincts that get us through the life cycle with minimal help from others. We are unfinished creatures requiring complex and extensive assistance in every part of our being, and language is the means for getting it."<sup>25</sup> Disabled adults are real adults, but they draw attention to an intrinsic feature of humanity that in adulthood we can evade as we cannot in childhood: we are not designed to be self-sufficient. We begin in frailty and dependence and end there; the disabled remind us of our ongoing frailty, which maturity enables us to hide from.<sup>26</sup> They may unself-consciously draw attention to hopes and fears and longings that belong to all humanity, to the loss of the past and to fears of nothingness and longings for completeness, to agonizings and yearnings, to alienation from oneself, specifically from our bodies, from other people, from society, from the world, and from God, to frustration, deprivation, and loss. They may also draw attention to trustings and self-loves that can be relaxed and confident and laid-back in spite of the insecurity of the present, which they are less free to evade by striving for false securities (for instance, in activism or do-gooding or entertainment) than the abled are.

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<sup>25</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God* (San Francisco/London: Harper, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London: DLT, 1979), pp. 64-65.

The mention of language might at first seem further to disable the disabled, who may lack language. By virtue of not lacking bodies – indeed, by being more focused on bodies – the disabled do not generally lack body language. They may indeed lack much informative and performative language, but not that elemental bodily language of relationship such as all human beings use before they have words, the language of plea, protest, love, hope, gratitude, and recognition, which adults surrender to their own loss. The disabled enable us to lament and to praise. As the gift of speaking in tongues enables the tongues of speechless people to find expression, as also happens in the primal scream,<sup>27</sup> so in their scream the severely disabled voice the scream of humanity. (A decade after first writing this paper, I must note that Ann is now virtually lacking in any means of consciously signifying anything, by words or body language; I do not know for sure whether even the occasional raising of an eyebrow is simply involuntary. Yet that also draws attention to a contrasting fact, that somehow in her total incapacity she communicates something to which people respond.)

Disabled people draw our attention to human beings' ambivalent relationship to their bodies. Our bodies are neither merely the shell within which the true person is found, nor the precise embodiment of the person. There is something miraculous about the way in human beings freedom, transcendence and rationality are conjoined with a material organism. Disabled people help us avoid the universal tendency to take too grand a view of humanity by so exaggerating spirituality and rationality that we forget the material substrate; it is through the body that we experience sensation, emotion, desire, and relationships.<sup>28</sup> They teach us to laugh and to cry, which are boundary reactions, expressive rather than linguistic.<sup>29</sup> When we laugh, cry, make love, or give birth we have to surrender to our bodies, to surrender control of our "selves" to them.<sup>30</sup> Disabled people illustrate sharply this aspect of normal human experience that we may fear and avoid, and thereby reduce ourselves to less than human. Our ambivalent relationship with our bodies as human beings means we need to let them have their way if we are to be fully human.

The lack of spoken language is a terrible deprivation, one of the most terrible of deprivations, and one that may more threaten the humanity of the disabled person than any physical handicap. This is not only because it so inhibits communication, but also because it inhibits thought and reflection, for the possession of language plays a key role in making thought possible. The lack of language thus inhibits self-awareness and identity. In the narrow sense that might be only an intellectual's perspective, but we also live in the context of broader contemporary awareness that "if you haven't told the story you haven't really had the experience."<sup>31</sup> So disabled people, like women whose story has not been told, may not have had the experience.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "The Charismatic Variety of Life," lecture at St John's Theological College, Nottingham, UK, October 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity*, pp. 47-58.

<sup>29</sup> See Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 1970.

<sup>30</sup> Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Heather Walton and Susan Durber (ed.), *Silence in Heaven* (London: SCM, 1994), p. 153.

Alongside the possibility that disabled people may lack that developed capacity for reasoning which is so important to intellectuals, we must then put the fact that nevertheless one does not experience disabled, even speechless, people as sub-human, certainly no more so than (schizoid) intellectuals. Perhaps human nature and the image of God should be viewed in the light of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances.<sup>32</sup> There are a number of features that recur throughout the human "family," but most human beings will manifest some and not others and the possession or lack of one or another does not make or prevent someone belonging to the family.

Disabled people also thus remind us again that being human, being in God's image, is a corporate affair. To the corporateness of humanity's being in God's image they bring some gifts, as intellectuals bring others, and none is to be despised. The points Paul makes about the church as the body of Christ apply also to the body of humanity. The unity of humanity lies not in identity but in shared and complementary diversity. The disabled contribute their gift(s) to this body, even if we have no right to insist that they themselves view their disability as a gift to them. We and they nevertheless recall that whatever parts we are inclined to view as weak- and foolish-looking therefore possess particular glory and dignity (1 Cor 12:22-24). Thus communities without disabled people are disabled communities, so that the world needs the awakening of the community of the abled and the disabled if it is to be human.<sup>33</sup> It is important for the sake of the disabled themselves that we are wary of talk of "common human experience" which excludes their uncommon human experience.<sup>34</sup> But in addition, when the church or the world marginalizes disabled people, it disables and dehumanizes itself.

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<sup>32</sup> See *Philosophical Investigations-Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Oxford: Blackwell/New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 65-67.

<sup>33</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "The Charismatic Variety of Life."

<sup>34</sup> Eiesland, *Disabled God*, p. 21.